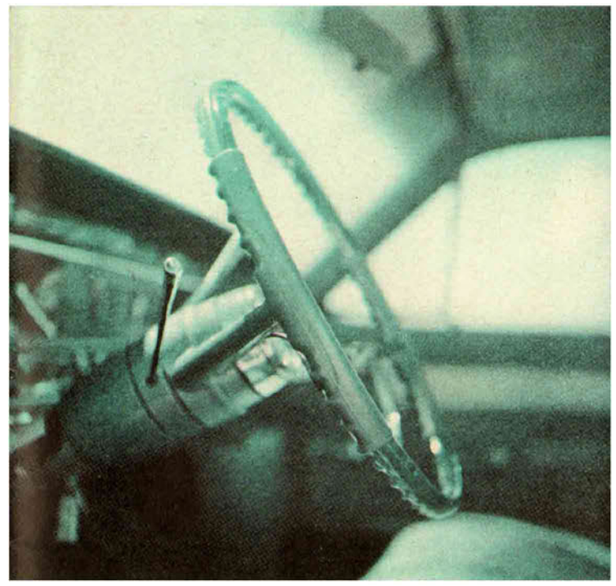
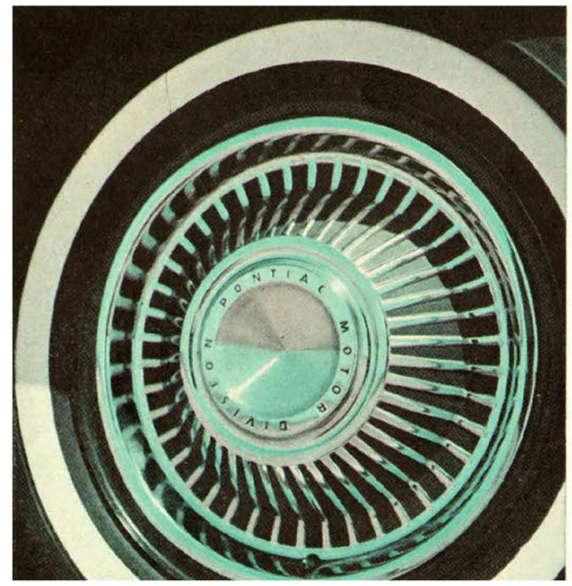
CAR LIFE ROAD TEST

Customer comfort is inevitable in this big cruiser

Pontiac Catalina





IF EVER THERE was a textbook example of "What Sells to the Affluent American," the Pontiac Catalina sedan must surely be it. A solid No. 3 in the 1963 sales race, it represents to Americans what a British automobile ad calls "grace, space, pace."

The resurgence of the big, luxurious sedan (although by virtue of its size, a hardtop coupe could be regarded as a sedan, too) in the U.S. automotive sales picture has become marked in the 1963 model year. Where this sort of automobile was only tepid in a lukewarm market seven years ago, it is now coming back into the prestigious position it held prior to 1955.

Indeed, there is much to recommend this style of conveyance: a luxury of surplus space for driver and five passengers, a Carlsbad Cavernous trunk, a silent and powerful engine teamed with a silent and jerkless transmission, and the wheelbase of the Queen Mary. Pontiac fills this format admirably, even with its least expensive Catalina line, and for extra measure tosses in a look and feel of solid-iron durability.

Probably the biggest key to the sales success of the Catalina series is its price structure. Just slightly over that of the Ford-Chevrolet-Dodge-Plymouth category, it actually compares with those cars on a dollar-per-dollar basis when they are similarly equipped. Where a Chevrolet Impala with a 327-cu. in./250-bhp V-8 engine and Powerglide lists for $3051, and a Ford Galaxie 500 with 352/220 V-8 and Cruise-O-Matic for $3040, the Catalina 4-door in standard trim (but with Hydra-Matic) goes for $3026.

Of course, the Pontiac prices can go a lot higher than those of the aforementioned competitors, but that's the way the structure soars. It's no trouble at all to order up a $4000 Catalina, which started with a basic list price of $2795—just install power equipment, automatic transmission, AM/FM radio, air conditioning and an optional engine.

The standard Catalina is by no means underpowered. Though the engine is rated at only 215 bhp it has 394 lb.-ft. of torque, which is plenty to pull it along super-silently on its 2.69:1 axle. However, this 389-cu. in. V-8 comes in about a half-dozen different strengths, dependent upon which compression, carburetion or camshaft is used, before the bore is increased for the 421-cu. in. series.

The picture looks like this:

Cu. in. displ.	Bhp/ rpm	Torque/ rpm	Comp. ratio	Carburetion	Intake cam duration
389..	215/3600..	394/2000..	8.60...	1-2...	252
389..	230/4000..	386/2000..	8.60...	1-2...	269
389..	235/3600..	407/2000..	8.60...	1-4...	252
389..	267/4200..	410/2400..	10.25...	1-2...	269
389..	283/4400..	418/2800..	10.25...	1-2...	273
389..	303/4600..	430/2800..	10.25...	1-4...	273
389..	313/4600..	430/3200..	10.25...	3-2...	273
421..	353/5000..	455/3400..	10.75...	1-4...	292
421..	370/5200..	460/3800..	10.75...	3-2...	292

There's one for everyone and every purpose: from the economy special 230-bhp, to the rip-snorting 370-bhp 421-HO. Pontiac compounds this multiplicity with a wide choice of transmissions and axle ratios so that the astute customer can literally "build" his own vehicle. We know several who have done just that—one fellow who ordered up a heavy-duty station wagon, complete with 4-speed transmission, for towing his sports/racing car on a trailer.

We can cite two other examples of custom-ordering to fit an individual's taste: Friend A ordered a Catalina convertible with 4-speed transmission (wide, 2.54 ratio), 353-bhp, 421-HO engine, heavy-duty suspension and brakes and the longest, lowest axle ratio Pontiac has listed, 2.56:1. This gives him approximately 30.1 mph/1000 rpm, or a potential of 62, 82, 104 and 157 mph at the power peak in the various gears. Actually, it is doubtful that the car could go much over 135 mph in top gear, although the owner, who likes this overdrive-cruising effect, would never try it to find out.

Friend B bought a '63 Grand Prix (which is built on the Catalina chassis) with the 3-carburetored 421-HO, same 4-speed and HD suspension, but got a 3.64:1 differential. He glories in the belt-in-the-back acceleration he gets with his 21.2 mph/1000 rpm gearing although it reduces his in-gear peak speeds to only 43, 58, 71 and 110 mph. He has performance with a capital P. A gets around 14-16 mpg, B gets 9-12 mpg, so the fuel economy factor isn't very large. The thing to remember, however, is that both are happy with their cars, both feel they got just what they wanted; one has terrific acceleration, the other a terrific cruise.

They both agree, too, on the value of the optional HD suspension. Specifications show normal spring rates (at the wheels) of 90 lb./in. in front and 110 lb./in. at the rear which seems to be much too soft for good control. The rates for the optional springs are not listed, but we'd guess them to be at least 110 front and 125 rear (as a comparison, the Chrysler 300-J, an excellent handling car, has ride rates of 125 and 150 lb./in.).

The HD kit includes a huskier anti-roll bar at the front and stronger shock absorbers, along with the stiffer springs. They're listed ostensibly for station wagons or police cruisers but are available to the general public at a nominal cost, if the buyer will be adamant in ordering them. At one point in the '63 model year, these safety items were withdrawn because one Pontiac official saw a Grand Prix so equipped and thought it "sat up too high." ▶

Pontiac Catalina

At any rate, with the HD suspension the big Catalina tracks true as Hiawatha's arrow and adds a whole new level of comfort: the elimination of the yawing, rolling, pitching motion that accompanies one of these dreamboats on anything rougher than Lake Placid. With standard suspension, the car is reminiscent of a tramp steamer in a North Atlantic gale.

Power steering does little to ease the situation, as it seems to have little correlation with what is necessary to control the front wheels. Although it does give the driver a slightly faster ratio (22.5:1 vs. 29.1 for manual) and less steering wheel wind (4.25 vs. 5.50 turns, lock to lock), it never lets him know just how the front wheels are situated with regard to the road. The best thing we can say about it is that it allows the use of GM's Saginaw Division adjustable-tilting steering wheel, a worthwhile extra unless you're the exact physical duplicate of the "average man."

The Catalina's seats are comfortable, though, and if you're not driving it's very easy to stretch out and relax. The 4-door sedan gives an especially luxurious amount of interior space and the starting string of the local basketball team undoubtedly could travel to the next "away" game without so much as a leg cramp.

Pontiac interiors (excluding the dash panel) are, as far as we're concerned, the best in the industry. Although the Catalina's door trim got a little bit rococo, the rest of the upholstering is high quality, tough material which has the admirable properties of looking good and appearing as if it would wear forever.

Our complaint centers upon the dash and instrument panel. Actual instruments are sparse, there being only a speedometer, an odometer and a fuel level gauge and the usual assortment of non-educational blinking lights. Here again, the buyer has a choice: If he wants to know the condition of his car's various innards he can opt for a nicely calibrated set of instruments, if not, what he doesn't know may not hurt him. Below this reposes a yard-wide panel of nicely-turned, chromed knobs. Reading from left to right, they operate: lights, wiper, heater fan, heater temperature, cigarette lighter, radio volume, radio tuning. The order is nice, but being all the same, and not too clearly labeled, it's very easy to turn on the lights instead of the wipers and tune in on maximum heat when reaching for the lighter. At night, when one must not take his eyes off the road, this becomes fairly confusing.

The transmission control system, too, is a little vague. The drive positions are marked 'D'-L-R, which means that if you position the pointer as near as 'D as you can, it will run up through all three forward speeds for you. If you put it at D', you get 1st and 2nd; L gets only 1st. The problem arises when you forget, in traffic, to go from D' to 'D; then you run along the next open road in 2nd, turning only 3200 rpm at 60 mph, with an engine so silent it won't remind you of your stupid mistake. What, say, was wrong with indicating the positions as D-2-1, or D-S-L, or even D-D2-DL?

The transmission brings up another interesting point, or, more correctly, the shift points. With this latest type of Hydra-Matic, the driver gets to select his own shifts, should he wish, or the whole thing can be left up to the automatic control mechanism. He can, if he's patient, run the engine up to 5000 rpm (it runs out of breath about 4400 rpm and takes a disproportionate time to reach 5000) before moving the control lever from L to D'; ditto D' to 'D. If he leaves it to the Black Box in the basement, it elects to change gears (actually bands) at about 3600 rpm (L to D') and 4100 rpm (D' to 'D) under wide-open throttle conditions. This coincides with actual speeds of 35 and 75 mph, both speeds being nicely over the engine's torque peak. More important, the automatic shifts took less elapsed time than the manually forced ones at higher rpm. A stop-watch check showed that 1-2 shifts consumed 1 sec. at 3800 rpm, 2.0 sec. at 4000 rpm, and 2.5 sec. at 4500 rpm.

Checking the car against the measured ¼-mile trap, we consequently found that acceleration times were better when we just "stomped & steered." Our average elapsed time was 17.9 sec., at 81 mph, which is relatively good for a car weighing two tons and carrying such a long gear.

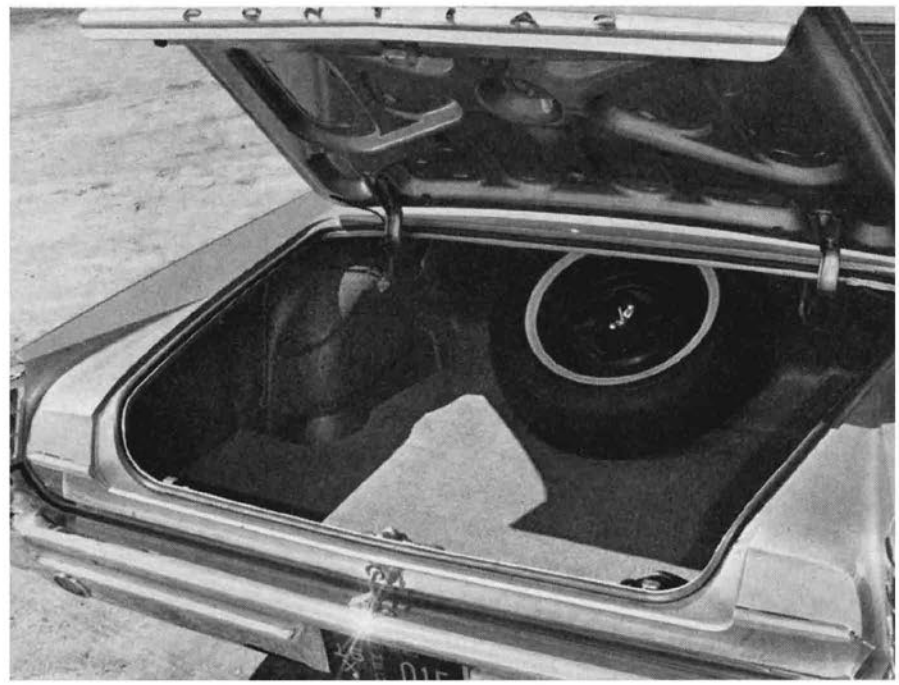
Although this car's axle ratio of 2.69:1 was designed to give improved fuel economy, our best tankful average was only 12.1 mpg. And it operated only on premium grade fuel, because of our 267-bhp optional engine's 10.25:1 compression ratio. It would appear that such fuel consumption might be the factor that separates the "medium-price buyer" from the low-pricer. Again, however, Pontiac has an option to suit the need: the 230-bhp (see table) is specifically designed to operate on regular-grade fuel in a miserly manner.

What really sells the Pontiac is its

Pontiac Catalina

look of quality. Knobs, handles, trim and fitments all look solidly designed and properly and squarely attached. One gets the impression that these things wouldn't dare fall off. There's a feel of quality, too. Despite the willowy-wallowy suspension, the car feels like a piece of tool-room steel; it feels as if it would run forever. Then, there's the sound of quality—absolute silence. With its long-geared, slow-turning engine effectively insulated and the road completely isolated, the Catalina cruises in complete quiet.

Small wonder that Pontiac ranks No. 3 in U.S. automotive sales. At its price, it's the best there is. However, as we've pointed out, there's always room for improvement. ■



CAR LIFE ROAD TEST

1963 PONTIAC
Catalina 4-Door Sedan

SPECIFICATIONS

List price	$2795
Price, as tested	3334
Curb weight, lb	3985
Test weight	4340
distribution, %	56/44
Tire size	8.00-14
Tire capacity, lb @ 24 psi	4700
Brake swept area	311
Engine type	V-8, ohv
Bore & stroke	4.063 x 3.75
Displacement, cu in	389
Compression ratio	10.25
Carburetion	1 x 2
Bhp @ rpm	267 @ 4200
equivalent mph	122
Torque, lb-ft	410 @ 2400
equivalent mph	70.0

DIMENSIONS

Wheelbase, in	120.0
Tread, f and r	62.5/64.0
Over-all length, in	211.9
width	78.7
height	54.2
equivalent vol, cu ft	523
Frontal area, sq ft	23.7
Ground clearance, in	6.0
Steering ratio, o/a	29.1
turns, lock to lock	5.5
turning circle, ft	42.8
Hip room, front	63.3
Hip room, rear	63.5
Pedal to seat back, max	43.2
Floor to ground	14.0
Luggage vol, cu ft	16.4
Fuel tank capacity, gal	25.0

EXTRA-COST OPTIONS

Hydra-Matic, power steering, power brakes, 267-bhp engine, tinted glass, wsw tires, radio.

GEAR RATIOS

3rd (1.00), overall	2.69
2nd (1.56)	4.20
1st (2.97)	8.09
1st (2.97 x 1.20)	9.71

PERFORMANCE

Top speed (4000), mph	117
Shifts, rpm–mph (auto.)	
3rd ( )	
2nd (4120)	77
1st (3680)	36

ACCELERATION

0-30 mph, sec	3.8
0-40	5.8
0-50	7.9
0-60	10.1
0-70	13.2
0-80	17.6
0-100	28.6
Standing ¼ mile	17.9
speed at end	81

FUEL CONSUMPTION

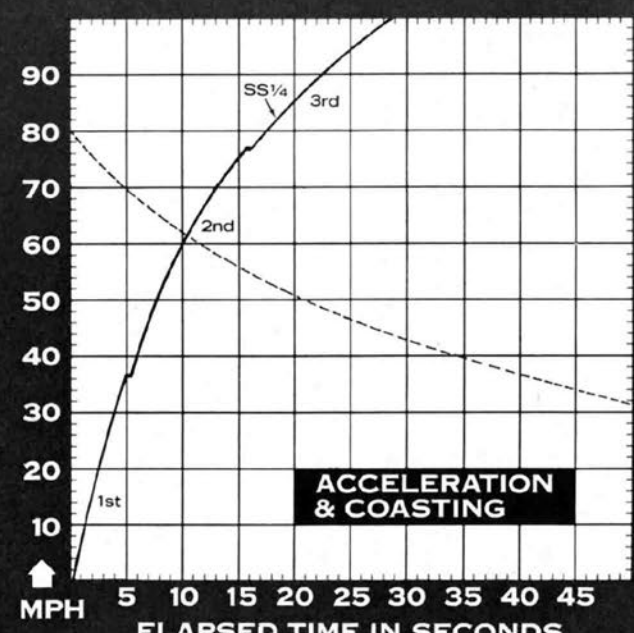
Normal range, mpg	11-14

SPEEDOMETER ERROR

30 mph, actual	29.1
60 mph	57.0
90 mph	87.4

CALCULATED DATA

Lb/hp (test wt)	16.2
Cu ft/ton mile	107
Mph/1000 rpm	29.2
Engine revs/mile	2060
Piston travel, ft/mile	1290
Car Life wear index	26.6

PULLING POWER

70 mph, max. gradient, %	13.7
50	20.8
30	31.5
Total drag at 60 mph, lb	174